

The South Carolina Legislators Trade Institute

Creating Knowledgeable Officials

by Peter Lehman

South Carolina State Ports Authority

and

Carol Conway

Southern Growth Policies Board

Nearly four years ago, the South Carolina District Export Council (SCDEC) hosted the first Legislators Trade Institute in the state to bring topics of international trade to the attention of elected state officials. In cooperation with several governmental and non-governmental trade organizations (the Columbia U.S. Export Assistance Center, Port of Charleston, Propeller Club of the United States, South Carolina State Ports Authority, South Carolina Department of Commerce, and Southern Growth Policies Board), the SCDEC staged its first networking and educational event in Charleston. The South Carolina Legislators Trade Institute (SCLTI) consisted of a day and a half of presentations by experts and discussions between exporters and state legislators on the advantages and disadvantages of international commerce, improvements needed to continue and expand trade, and what the elected representatives could do to help. The impetus for creating the institute was to formulate a comprehensive communications program to educate state and federal legislators about the value of trade to South Carolina. The SCDEC wanted to make clear to legislators the connection between trade and economic vitality and how trade is related to expanding the manufacturing and distribution base of the state.

The SCLTI was established in October 1999, and each year the structure of the events and the topics covered are refined and kept current to build upon previous years of education. Today, the institute is nearly two full days of business programs and social events, with participation by elected officials from both the state and federal level.

Getting the message to legislators is a challenge for any group but especially for those engaged in trade. The SCLTI organizers sought innovative ways to create communication links, because competition is fierce to reach the ears of legislative leaders. The SCLTI was created as an additional means to educate legislators and create continuous communication about individual issues. By joining forces with regional trade groups, creating the SCLTI as the vehicle to format and present key issues, the SCDEC and its partners succeeded in creating a method to access, educate, and update federal and local legislators, legislative staff, and other decision-makers on an ongoing basis. Organizers have expanded the SCLTI in recent years to include additional events during the year at various locations around the state. These local events are smaller and include inviting members of the general assembly and congressional delegation whose districts surround the event location to focus on issues with an immediate and local impact. Translating larger trade issues into this local frame of reference makes the issues real and meaningful. An

exporter explaining the challenges he has to meet in getting his products to market overseas puts a constituent's face to an abstract concept for legislators.

South Carolina exporters face a number of issues that are topics for the SCLTI to bring to legislators. Some top issues covered by the SCLTI include a port expansion project, the need to promote exporting to South Carolina businesses, and clearly drawing the link between trade and economic stability to legislators as well as businesses.

As state and federal legislators become more aware of how global trade affects their constituencies and regions, they are better equipped to help South Carolina compete in the global marketplace. The well-educated and established alumni of the SCLTI—many of whom will go on to become federal legislators or governors—will evolve as the institute matures. This creates a natural network between top political and business leaders of today and tomorrow and will have far-reaching positive implications for businesses, the state economy, and, therefore, the future of South Carolina.

WHAT DOES THE SCLTI ENTAIL?

Our legislative leaders need to better understand how South Carolina functions in the global economy. Representatives understand the job-creation effect of landing an economic development prospect, but few

understand the job-creation effects of trade or what actions they could take to increase state exports and foreign investment. Over five years ago, the South Carolina District Export Council recognized the need to focus the attention of elected officials on international trade to and from South Carolina. It also realized that information had to be presented in a non-partisan, balanced format, which the SCDEC is ideally suited to provide. As a non-profit, volunteer organization, the SCDEC felt that providing ongoing communication between South Carolina elected officials, exporters, and trade organizations conformed to its mandate to promote the growth of exports from the state. The result was the development of the annual, day-and-a-half trade institute for legislators and their staff to learn about the jobs impact of exporters in their districts, and how positive trade outcomes depend on strategic investment in transportation and other state-supported systems. The networking "mix" includes federal representatives as well as state officials, who often have the same or overlapping constituent districts, resulting in productive discussions of local trade and development issues.

THE DESIGN BEHIND THE CONCEPT

Drawing on the expertise and networks of the collaborators, the institute is able to focus the efforts of all these groups in one concerted effort to communicate to policy-makers. SCLTI events combine business and social interaction for optimal communication.

All of our state and federal legislators are invited, as are a number of top state executive officials and their staff. In the past, events began in Charleston with an afternoon golf tournament; the foursomes were structured to spark dialogue among the legislators, their staff, sponsors, trade representatives, and maritime officials. The annual State of the Port reception and dinner followed in the evening, where the

president of the Ports Authority gave his annual address.

The State of the Port dinner in 2002 was the best attended ever, with more than 375 people, including the governor-elect, many state legislators and senior staff, and two U.S. congressmen. The South Carolina products display portion of the State of the Port dinner was an overwhelming success. In order to make the cargo of the Port of Charleston "come alive" to the SCLTI participants and dinner guests, 30 South Carolina companies displayed their products around the room and on the pier outside the building. There were four BMW cars on display, raw Michelin rubber and the finished products, Stingray speedboats, Wilson sporting goods, Fuji film products, and many others. Having products on display as tangible examples of cargo handled by the port drove home the impact of trade on the local economy.

More structured education took place on the second day of the institute. The morning started off with breakfast and a keynote speaker, Rep. Jim DeMint (R-Greenville), who detailed the dramatic passage of trade promotion authority under the Trade Act of 2002. Attendees then climbed aboard a boat for a four-hour port and harbor tour. During the tour, participants listened to a roundtable of manufacturers, traders, and port consultants, all part of the program of the SCLTI. After lunch the SCLTI concluded with a keynote address that tied the institute's message together. Each year the number of participants has increased, the message has been honed and the significance as well as the reputation of the institute has grown.

YEARS OF WORK

The South Carolina Legislators Trade Institute has had a significant impact on the frequency and quality of discussion among state leaders about trade and policies to support trade. Recently, the institute influenced legislative decisions to invest in upgrading port

facilities. Other indirect evidence of the value of the institute is the fact that it has star power, drawing leaders, sponsors, and riveting speakers.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

State and local leaders must become better acquainted with the global trends that affect their economies and policies. The SCLTI offers a sharp contrast between the usual approach to leadership trade education—such as a seminar where the speakers may outnumber the audience—and a high-profile event tailored to the interests of the leaders. A successful institute is:

- Collaborative, enlisting all potential advocates, not just one or two;
- Strategic, finding the right institutional platform and being clear in its messages;
- Contextual, providing tangible examples of a wide array of exports;
- Fun, offering a mix of business and social events, injecting humor, and taking place where people want to be; and
- Convenient, making it easy for a legislator to accept an invitation.

Using the proven formula of the SCLTI, other regions can benefit from educating their local elected leaders on the advantages of trade. ■